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ABSTRACT

The makeup of student bodies in higher education has become more diverse, but students tend to be clustered in segments of the postsecondary system and in various levels and fields. Many campuses do not effectively integrate students who are different. Institutions that are successful in this area tend to: (1) focus on student success and provide the tools for success; (2) enhance coordination and articulation with other educational levels; (3) dedicate resources to fostering acceptance; (4) have access to good information on institution and students; and (5) have leaders in the faculty and administration who provide direction for these efforts. Transformation of the institution into a system that is organized for diversity means addressing a number of issues, including faculty and staff diversity, institutional mission and values, educating for diversity, dealing with conflict, the quality of interaction between students and faculty and institution, and the perceived conflict between quality and diversity. Institutions and policymakers can take these steps to respond to diversity: undertaking comprehensive institutional assessment and cross-institutional research, coordinating among sectors, increasing the numbers of students entering teaching, involving organizations successfully meeting the challenge, improving access, providing sustained commitment, and providing leadership. (MSE)

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ERIC DIGEST

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The Challenge of Diversity: Involvement or Alienation in the Academy?

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For years, researchers have forecast the increasing diversification of students in higher education as a result of changing demographics and a variety of other social and economic shifts. The diverse elements of today's student body include age, gender, ethnic and racial backgrounds, and increasing numbers of differently abled and part-time students. Despite the difficulties inherent in generalizing across such disparate groups and individuals, the issues higher education faces fundamentally relate to the capacity of institutions to function in a pluralistic environment. While it is unrealistic to assume that higher education will solve all these challenges independent of the rest of society, it is clear that the successful involvement of diverse populations has significant implications for education and for the nation.

What Is the Current Status of Enrollments, Graduation Rates, and the Campus Climate?

Although the makeup of today's student bodies is more diverse than 20 years ago, current enrollments suggest that this trend has reversed itself for some groups. Moreover, many students are clustered not only in segments of the postsecondary system but also in various levels and fields. Several recent national reports have sounded an alarm that the progress with respect to enrollments is not sufficient. Observers generally agree that retention overall and the retention rate for certain specific populations are critical problems for many institutions, even though surprisingly little is known about retention for most minority populations and for other nontraditional groups. One of the more troubling themes to emerge is that many campuses do not effectively involve students who are different. Students must confront stereotypic attitudes, unfamiliar values, ineffective teaching methods, and an organizational approach that may not support their efforts to succeed. While such concerns are prominent in the experience of minority students, issues of stereotyping, social isolation, and alienation are found in each of the literatures on women, disabled students, and adult learners as well. Indeed, in contemporary higher education, the condition of diversity is all too often a condition of alienation.

What Are the Patterns in Institutions Labeled Successful?

Five major themes emerge from a variety of studies looking at successful institutions. These institutions:

1. Focus on students' success and provide the tools for success;
2. Have begun to develop programs for increased coordination with elementary and secondary grades and for enhanced articulation between community colleges and four-year colleges and universities;
3. Dedicate energy and resources to creating an accepting environment that nourishes and encourages success;
4. Have access to good information that focuses on the institution and students;
5. Include leaders in the faculty and administration who provide strong direction for these efforts.

In addition to the insights that can be developed from successful institutions, lessons can be learned from women's colleges and from historically black institutions. Central to their success is the presence of many African-American and female faculty and administrators.

What Are the Fundamental Issues of Organizing for Diversity?

The basic conceptual framework for many of the more traditional responses to diversity has focused essentially on *student assistance*. These approaches address the particular needs or "problems" felt to be barriers to students' success. Many institutions have broadened these efforts to include *institutional accommodations*, which acknowledges that some of the barriers to success rest with the institution itself. While these accommodations are steps in the right direction, they are not sufficient in themselves. They should be viewed as part of a broader effort included in the capacity of institutions to *organize for diversity*. At the core of this effort will be an organization's ability to educate in a pluralistic society for a pluralistic world. To reach such a place requires a shift not only in thinking but also in framing the questions we ask. The challenges of such fundamental transformation mean grappling with a number of complex issues:

- *Diversity of faculty and staff.* Diverse perspectives are required to develop organizations sensitive to pluralism.
- *Mission and values.* The issue of values emerges at a number of levels. Perhaps the most challenging has to do with the ways in which students perceive that the values and perspectives they bring are not appreciated and may even put them in conflict with the institution's norms and behaviors.
- *Educating for diversity.* The content of the curriculum, styles of teaching, and modes of assessment are three elements in this effort.
- *Dealing with conflict.* The conditions for conflict are present on many campuses. Indeed, conflict may be an essential part of the process institutions will experience to clarify the many complex issues involved in creating pluralistic communities. Conflict may be part of the institutional learning process.
- *The quality of interaction.* A growing body of research evidence reflects the importance of students' involvement with the institution and peers and between students and faculty.
- *The perceived conflict between quality and diversity.* The continuing message that a fundamental conflict exists between diversity and quality is perhaps the most compelling argument for reshaping the questions and the discourse about this topic. We *can* broaden our understanding about quality without diluting expectations for learning or for the curriculum, but to do so will require reframing our understanding about the meaning of quality, the definition of standards, performance criteria, and assessment.

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What Are the Implications of the Challenge of Diversity?

The challenge of diversity is national in scope. Given the complexities involved, no recipes are available to create truly pluralistic organizations. Institutions and policy makers can take some steps, however, to facilitate the process of adequately responding to diversity.

1. A comprehensive institutional assessment can provide important data from which priorities can be identified.
2. Cross-institutional research can identify successful institutions, identify ways in which involvement can be promoted, and clarify often conflicting material in the literature.
3. Coordination among the educational sectors can improve articulation and movement between levels and types of institutions.
4. Developing programs and funds can increase the number of students who enter teaching at all levels.
5. Organizations that succeed in meeting this challenge can also play a significant role in educating all future teachers and citizens to function in a diverse culture.
6. Providing increased local, state, and national financial aid will make access more possible for virtually every population of students.
7. Sustained commitment and effort rather than episodic interest will be required.
8. Leadership plays a central role, not only in setting goals and providing resources but also in framing the questions and setting the tone for deliberations.

If a single lesson is to be learned from the literature on diversity, it is that we cannot simply "add and stir." The challenges are many, but it is clear that the process of meeting them will bring great benefits to all members of the community and to the institution itself. The resources of diversity within an organization are more likely to prepare it for the future than any other resource.

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